

"If You're Nervous in the Service . . .": Training Songs of Female Soldiers in the '40s¹

Carol Burke

In 1942 women began enlisting as WAACs, WAVES, SPARS, WAFFS and Lady Leathernecks² in increasingly large numbers until, by the end of the war, 350,000 women had served in the military.³ At training camps in Des Moines, the Coast Guard Academy, Hunter College, Smith and Holyoke, these women adapted popular songs by inventing verses which defined them as military women, proclaimed their enthusiasm and eagerness to serve, and voiced their frustration about the rigors of training. The verses were improvised on such familiar tunes as "The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi," "Roll out the Barrel," "Pack Up Your Troubles," "Thanks for the Memories," "Man on the Flying Trapeze," "Pop Goes the Weasel" and "California, Here We Come." The enlistees sang of "WAAC days, WAAC days, dear old break-your-back days"; they adapted "Glow Worm" to lyricize the drudgery of the barracks:

At crack of dawn, we mop the porches,
Shine our shoes by light of torches,
Shave our necks for two-inch-clearance
Still we're gigged for personal appearance.
Turn our sheets with a six-inch ruler,
Send our rings back to the jeweler,
We don't care we'll show them how,
We're in the Army now.⁴

Women did march to a few of the same songs as the male units, songs like "Gee, Mom I Wanna Go Home" ("The meat in the Army/They say is mighty fine/Last night we had ten puppies/Today we've only nine") and appended verses of their own ("The stockings in the Army/They're made of binder twine") and ("The sweaters in the Army/They say are mighty fine,/But even Lana Turner/Would look like Frankenstein").⁵

Like male soldiers in training, these women vented their disillusionment with military life. Expecting action and excitement, recruits soon found themselves bound to the domestic drudgery they thought they had left behind:

They told us we'd be soldier girls
If we would volunteer,

But we will be good kitchen maids
 When we get out of here.

With scrubbing floors and dusting chairs
 And takin' orders and how
 And they all say when we complain,
 You're in the Army now.⁶

But, whereas their male counterparts simply complained, women in training often tempered their grumbling with enthusiastic choruses that rationalized immediate discomforts as inevitable sacrifices. They celebrated their new identity as female soldiers and wrapped even their discontent in fervent patriotism. In the following, sung to the tune of "Funiculee, Funicla," what begins as disillusionment about joining the Army quickly rallies round to a hearty endorsement of training: the simple song of complaint is transformed into recruitment appeal:

Some join the WAACs to get a bit of glamour,
 What a mistake, what a mistake!
 "Let's join the WAACs and have some fun," they clamor,
 Wait till they ache, wait till they ache.
 We know that they will soon be making brown beds
 And scrubbing floors, and scrubbing floors,
 To pass a stiff inspection by some crowned heads,
 And other chores, and other chores.

But we love it, we wouldn't want to change,
 Civilian life to us seems very strange,
 We learn to take, we learn to give
 We learn new lessons every day,
 If you really want to live, come join the WAACs and shout,
 Hurray!⁷

Women in training described themselves as tired but happy domestics, as camp followers-made-soldiers who managed if not to transform drudgery into splendor, at least to put a good face on it. In their version of "There's a Tavern in the Town," WAACs from Fort Des Moines sang of the toil of training, ameliorated by the WAAC smile:

There's a WAAC camp in Des Moines—in Des Moines,
 Which we were very proud to join—proud to join,
 Oh we scrub, we mop we drill for miles and miles
 Our faces always wreathed in smiles.⁸

Although these songs enthusiastically endorsed the hard work of training, they also curbed any fervor women might harbor for military action. We certainly know that following training, some of these women displayed courage as well as endured hardships, some marching only twenty miles behind male combat

troops in Europe, others flying supply and transport missions. But it was their humility rather than their valour that these songs anticipated.

Defensive in nature, many of these songs insisted on the modest desires of women in uniform, as if such songs were intended to quiet the fears of those who opposed the enlistment of women on the grounds that this militarization would be the first step toward arming women. In considering folk groups within institutions, we must never fail to examine the ways in which lore sanctions approved values and censures others.⁹ Although some military women secretly desired to join their male counterparts in combat, they never voiced this yearning as corporate sentiment. Instead, they insisted:

I don't wanna march in the Infantry,
Ride in the Cavalry, shoot in Artillery.
I don't wanna fly over Germany.
I just wanna be a WAAC.

We're the WAACs and everyone a soldier,
To class we go, no rifle on our shoulder,
But we work to send a man who's bolder
So we'll all go free.¹⁰

Obviously, autonomy was to be won not only through sacrifice but also by clearly distinguishing the work of military women from the work of military men. These songs might be read simply as work songs that helped women endure the discomfort and tedium of training and that transparently communicated shared sentiments. But such a reading is, indeed, a simple one, for it fails to take into account the fact that the performances of these songs always occurred within earshot of authority. As occupational folklore generated within the total institution, these songs affirmed institutional values and transferred them, through training, on to the next batch of fresh recruits.

It might be argued, too, that these songs should be read solely in a contemporary context in which military women have demonstrated their willingness to risk their lives in the service of their country. But even as early as 1917, American popular songs proclaimed the enthusiasm for women in war:

Although I'm not a socialist
I wish they'd let the women enlist.
And if the men refuse to fight
I wish they'd give the women the right.¹¹

And from another song:

If they should ever send a suffrage regiment
I'd hurry to enlist.¹²

Although popular sentiment of 20 years earlier had celebrated women's full participation in war, and although many military women were certainly willing to risk their lives in the same ways as men, these songs admitted no such radical sentiment. Instead, they often characterized the female soldier as the scatterbrained,

zany girl who would somehow manage to befuddle the enemy enough to win the war:

Over there, over there
 Send the word to the boys over there
 That the WACs are coming, the WACs are coming
 To get in everybody's hair.
 We will aid in the raid
 That our men make to win in Berlin
 We'll be over, we're coming over
 And we won't be back
 Til they crack up over there.¹³

Clearly, had women serving in Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific merely gotten "in everybody's hair," overseas commanders would not have requested far more female soldiers than Washington could hope to supply.¹⁴ The trivialization of women's labor echoed as one of the most dominant strains in these songs.

Many of these songs humorously depicted the female soldier as incompetent. "Ginny the Ninny of the Goon Platoon,"¹⁵ forever dreaming of the Captain she would marry, moved in one direction while her company moved in the other. Tillie, another humorous incompetent, continually failed to pass inspection and perform the simple chores required of her:

Tillie joined the Army,
 She enlisted in the WAACs
 And soon to Fort Des Moines our Till was making tracks,
 They issued her a uniform, her name was on a tag,
 And with the other stuff she got,
 They gave her a barracks bag.

They demonstrated how to place equipment in a trunk,
 And said to her, "Aux. if you don't want to flunk
 Your civies must be out of sight
 Or we will surely nag.
 All your personal things must go
 Under your barracks bag."

Tillie went to mess hall, but the poor girl couldn't eat,
 Exactly what the reason was our Till would not repeat,
 But later on it all came out,
 She really hit a snag,
 Tillie left her false teeth
 Under her barracks bag.

And then our Tillie drew K.P. in Mess No. 8,
 Every time she turned around, she broke another plate,
 The Sergeant said, "Now this won't do,"
 Her head began to wag
 So Tillie hid the wreckage

Under the barracks bag.

At Saturday inspection her hair was still too long,
The General scowled at her and said
"See here, your hair's cut wrong."
Now Tillie had a wig she wore to every ballroom shag,
Where do you think she kept it?
Under the barracks bag.

Tillie went on sick call when she caught the G.I. cold,
They gave her shots on top of that
That was worse than she'd been told.
They gave her pills and medicine that made her pockets sag,
Where do you think she put it?
Under the barracks bag.

At last Tillie died, it really was a shame,
Her funeral was military, and everybody came.
And Tillie's last request was that,
She really was a hag.
Comrades, will you bury me,
Under my barracks bag?¹⁶

Typically, when one of these training songs began with a spirited celebration of female professionalism, it ended with a sharp diminution of women's role. Take, for example, "Petticoat Soldiers," which called for female recruits to "stand side by side with doughboys, Marines, and sailors" in defense of liberty. It ended with these same women, obviously well behind men, having substituted make-up for guns, as if men were commissioned to wage one kind of attack and women another.

When the call to colors
Rang through this mighty land,
Our fair women answered
And took their vows to stand
Side by side with doughboys,
Marines and sailors, too,
In defending life and liberty for you.
Petticoat soldiers marching
In step to victory.
Petticoat soldiers marching
With heart and spirit free;
'Ever there's been an army,
To fight off ev'ry foe;
Now we have joined the forces
And go where-e're they go.
And you can bet we'll do
Our part for Uncle Sam,
For we're all set and keeping fit,
Yes, sir! Yes, ma'am!

We'll always serve our country
 In every cause it backs.
 We don't tote guns or bayonets,
 Our powder comes in compact sets.
 We're petticoat soldiers,
 Wacky WAACs!¹⁷

Contradiction made its way to the heart of these songs, and the oxymoronic dissonance between the title's two words, "petticoat" and "soldier" resolved itself in a kind of uneasy humor—the image of the "WACKY WAC." The efficient professional woman in training created an image of herself as the diminutive, incompetent and crazy female soldier. In one song she sang, "Yes, by cracky I'm a little WACY/I'm a little soldier girl...I fall in, I fall out, I fall asleep in class, no doubt."¹⁸

To comprehend how astounding this caricature was, one need only consider the background of these first female recruits. Most were between twenty-five and forty, 99% had held a job before enlisting and 90% had college training.¹⁹ Far different, for example, were their male counterparts, who typically had no college education, and only minimal work experience prior to military service. These songs of the crazy female soldier served, then, to remind female recruits on some level of the absurdity of their predicament, of their unfitness for military work and of its temporary status. Having stepped out of socially prescribed feminine roles in response to a national crisis, they were meant to someday return to home and hearth ("I'm a rippin', snortin' *Auxie*, but I'll be a captain's wife.")²⁰

But, in the meantime, women in training humorously invoked insanity and pregnancy as resolutions to their predicament. They advised:

If you're nervous in the service
 and you don't know what to do.
 Have a baby, Have a baby.²¹

or:

"Are you nervous in the service?
 Do you want a *C.D.D.*?²²
 Are you fed up with the set up?
 Come along, go nuts with me."

The popular song, "Valencia" was rewritten as "Dementia:" "Dementia/Has struck us one and all./That's why we're here on chorus call./Dementia."²³

Just as these songs humorously depicted the tension created by women entering roles never before defined as feminine, they also explored quite literally the way in which women "fit" the image of the female soldier newly created for them by those in authority. Uniforms were often the subjects of these songs. A number of interesting controversies developed in the military over the issue of women's uniforms, a hotly contested issue even today. The question of whether to issue undergarments and robes, items of clothing not given to men, produced heated debate. The designing of WAC uniforms by tailors who had only ever clothed male bodies resulted in awkward fits in early uniforms. Had women

been allowed to train in male uniforms as Oveta Culp Hobby, head of the WAC, had vociferously argued for, many hardships would have been prevented. Before their deployment to North Africa, the first 150 WACs to be sent overseas trained in the winter at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, in short-sleeved uniforms with neither gloves nor boots because the Army had not received its order of winter WAC uniforms.²⁴ After much resistance on the part of the Army higherups and much illness on the part of trainees, Hobby finally succeeded in securing male coats for these women.

In her address to the first WAC officers-to-be at Ft. Des Moines, Hobby explained their change from civilian to military life in terms of their uniform:

You have just made the change from peacetime pursuits to wartime tasks—from the individualism of civilian life to the anonymity of mass military life. You have given up comfortable homes, highly paid positions, leisure. You have taken off silks and put on khaki. And all for essentially the same reason—you have a debt and a date. A debt to democracy and a date with destiny.²⁵

Similarly, a few of these training songs conveyed the impression of a smart, well-disciplined female soldier, enthusiastically endorsing the uniform as a form of collective identity:

Have you heard of the girls of the Army
Who took the country by storm:
We belong to American Forces,
And we wear a smart uniform.²⁶

The uniform did not erase one's femininity; it merely redefined it:

We're the WAACs, We're the WAACs.
We're the girls in the khaki,
And we think the Army's grand.
We're the girls, soldier girls,
Minus frills, minus curls,
But pretty as a picture in our suits made of tan.²⁷

Many songs, however, humorously revealed the mismatch between soldier garb and the female body inside. These suits made of tan could be ill-fitting and uncomfortable, a fact to which this comic version of "Every Little Raindrop" testifies:

In my little GI shoes
I walk along the street.
In my little cotton hose,
I give the boys a treat.
My skirt looks like a barracks bag,
My hat just like a pot.
But I am in the Army now
And glad with what I got.
In my raincoat extra large,

I look just like a sack,
But I'm in the Army now
And glad to be a WAC.
The Army issues clothes alright;
They make you look an awful sight²⁸

“G.I. song” describes the transformation of the young pampered recruit, whose mother made her bed, cleaned her clothes and buttered her bread, into a WAC—a GI who accepts her new image:

Then she came to camp one day
Quickly learned the WACY way
Underwear “cafe au lait!”
Oh me, oh my, strictly GI.

Hats and shoes and skirts don't fit
Your girdle bunches when you sit
Come on rookies, you can't quit
Just heave a sigh and be G.I.²⁹

Female recruits forfeited stylish silks for ill-fitting khaki and sang as if to encourage other women to join them. With 78% of the American public favoring the conscription of women (according to Gallup polls at the time),³⁰ popular sentiment lined up behind them. But their transformation from civilian women into government issue soldiers was tentative and temporary, one meant to last only until the end of the war. And along with the construction of a G.I. self went the sentimental recollection of a non-G.I. self, to which the following harkens:

This is the song of a G.I. muse,
Lumbering along in G.I. shoes,
Sung to a sort of G.I. tune,
Under the G.I. southern moon.

G I'm loaded with GI clothes,
G I'm tired of GI hose,
G Hon, I'm sick of GI issue,
And, oh my darling, G I miss you.

G I long for a G I pass
Far from the dusty G I grass,
I'm so darn tired of GI whirls
With the usual crop of GI girls.

G I adore you, darling mine,
G I'm tired of this GI rhyme.
But G I'm happy and I'll tell you why,
Ours is love that is not GI.³¹

Notes

¹I would like to thank Helen Allen, who sent me songs from the archives of the Women's Army Corps Museum at Fort McClellan, Alabama, as well as Jean Colby, Frank Smith and Les Cleveland, who generously shared songs from their personal collections.

²The acronym, WAAC (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps), was replaced in 1943 by WAC (Women's Army Corps). WAVES stood for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, WAF for Women's Air Force; and SPAR (the Coast Guard term), for Semper Paratus—Always Ready. Women Marines were called Lady Leathernecks.

³Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982) 100.

⁴*Song Book* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944) 25. This first verse is followed by:

We don't care if it's ten below,
Cold gives our face a healthy glow,
We don't care if it rains or freezes
We'll march along to the cadence of sneezes.
We'll stand Reveille scantily clad,
Wearing cotton is the latest fad,
We don't care, we'll show them how
We're in the Army now.

⁵*WAC Song Book* (Fort Lee, VA: Special Services, Women's Army Corps Training Center, n.d.) 2.

⁶“*Soldier Girls*,” *WAC Songs*. From the Hazel Meyers papers, Library of Congress, Music and Performing Arts Division. This song was sung to the tune of “Solomon Levi.”

⁷Hazel Meyers papers.

⁸Hazel Meyers papers.

⁹See Carol Burke, “*Marching to Vietnam*,” *Journal of American Folklore* 102 (1989) 424-442.

¹⁰“*I Just Wanna Be a WAAC*,” Hazel Meyers papers. This song was sung to the tune of “Old Gray Mare.”

¹¹Edgar Allen, “*I'm a Regular Daughter of Uncle Sam*” (New York: Shapiro Bernstein & Co., 1917).

¹²Howard Rogers and James V. Monaco, “*I'm Going to Follow the Boys*” (New York: M. Whitmark, 1917).

¹³“*Over There*,” Agnes Underwood papers, U.S. Naval Academy Military Folklore Archive.

¹⁴Holm 30.

¹⁵Victoria Gotsky papers, Indiana University. Sung to the tune of “*The Strip Polka*.”

If there E'er was a private that was struck by the moon
Oh, it's Ginny the Ninny of the Goon platoon.
Oh, she flaunts femininity with curl and with frills,
But her mates want to choke her when she drills.
"Forward March, forward march," and she skids to the rear,
"Column right, column right," and she stalls changing gear,
But she's deaf to our curses unaware it's a crime,
That she drills, and always out of time.
For her thoughts are abstracted to a camp far away,
And she dreams of the Captain she will wed some day.
So she lists as she marches and at "Halt" bottoms up,
And her steps are all between the "Hups."
"Step it up, step it up" but unique is her rhythm,
"Slow it down, slow it down" but she isn't with 'em.
For she's off in a dream-world and her bliss is sublime.
So she drills, and always out of time.

¹⁶WAC Songbook 17-18.

¹⁷"Songs for Singing on the March," Fourth WAAC Training Center Special Service Office, publ. 154, n.d.

¹⁸Eleanor Moffett, "Yes, By Cracky," in the personal papers of Jean Colby, Las Vegas, NV.

¹⁹Holm 28.

²⁰"I Got Tags," Jean Colby. This song is sung to the tune of "Jingle, Jangle, Jingle:"

I got tags that jingle, jangle, jingle
As I go marching merrily along.
I got shots that tingle, stingle, tingle
But in my heart I always have a song.
Oh, Army life, with care and strife;
I'm a rippin' snortin' Auxie,
But I'll be a Sergeant's wife.
I got tags that jingle, jangle, jingle,
As I drill and so gaily march along.

²¹Both this verse and the fuller verse that follows were contributed by Jean Colby. Some may be more familiar with this in its male form:

If your baby has a baby
and she blames it on you—
Leaky rubber, leaky rubber.

²²C.D.D. refers to a "Section 8," or discharge for insanity.

²³Jean Kritzer, "Dementia," in the personal papers of Frank Smith.

²⁴Helen Rogan, *Mixed Company: Women in the Modern Army* (New York: Putnam, 1981) 132.

²⁵Rogan 131.

²⁶“The U.S. Army WAC,” *Songbook* 18. The verse continues:

We’re drilling and training and learning
To master the true Army way.
And take the place of the soldiers
Who are needed for the fray.

Chorus

At duty’s call, we offered all.
We’re the U.S. Army WAC.
Releasing men to fight and win
With a mightier attack.
We’re in to stay until the day
Our boys bring the Victory back.
Among the brave, our banners wave
We’re the U.S. Army WAC.

²⁷From the personal papers of Frank Smith.

²⁸“In My Little GI Shoes,” *WAC Songbook* 6. Sung to the tune of “Every Little Raindrop.”

²⁹“Oh, Me! Oh, My! That Ain’t GI,” *WAC Songbook* 22.